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ABSTRACT

The author supports the position that change in the basic speech course is needed and proposes a consensus model to achieve this change. A consensus model approach to the basic course provides for a reduction in entropy regarding objectives, activities, and progress in the classroom. Applying the theories of interpersonal communication taught in the classroom to actual classroom operation, decisions in the classroom would be based on consensus between student and instructor. Consequently, the author suggests that the basic course would provide an opportunity for sharing information and values about the broad field of communication. This approach would provide an opportunity for greater understanding of the historical, critical, experimental, and social ramifications of communication; a potential for a deeper level of understanding between students and instructor; and a worthwhile educational experience. In line with this position, the author suggests that the subject matter of communication courses should include a wide range of communication related subjects as materials for student performance. (LG)

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# SUBJECT MATTER RELEVANCE IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION, SKILLS, AND INSTRUCTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY: A CONSENSUS MODEL

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"Human Beings Are Not Very Easy to Change After All," is the title of an article by Amitai Etzioni in the June 3, 1972, issue of Saturday Review. The title is relevant for our consideration because it may explain the setting for what some communication educators base their "call for revolution." ("The First Course in Speech: A Call for Revolution," Speech Teacher, XXI, 3, September, 1972, p. 205 f.)

Authors Mehrley and Backes contend that the first course in speech has changed very little since its inception. In their rationale for revolt they cite the present tenuous state of higher education, the undesirable image of the typical first course, and the study by Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, and Petrie which states:

> In spite of the increased concern for communication and communication theory apparent in our journals and in the scholarly papers presented at our conventions, the basic course in the vast majority of the reporting schools continues to take a public speaking fundamentals approach, to use textbooks oriented toward public speaking, to emphasize the construction and delivery of informative and persuasive speeches, and to devote a large proportion of classroom time to the presentation and oral critique of four to six speeches by each student (Gibson, James W., et al., "The First Course in Speech: A Survey of U. S. Colleges and Universities," Speech Teacher, XIX, 1 January, 1970, p. 20).

The authors (Mehrley and Backes) propose that only a revolution will turn around the prevailing trend and provide greater depth of content drawing from the findings of behavioral scientists in the field.

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It is the purpose of this paper to: (1) agree with and support the need for change in the basic course, but (2) to propose a "consensus" rather than a "conflict" model to achieve this change, and (3) to provide suggestions for implementation of a "consensus" model for change.

First, there is evidence that some "first" courses in speech communication are, in fact, changing. David Hurt's study of basic communication courses at Michigan State, University of Wisconsin, University of Kansas, Ohio University, and General Motors Institute illustrate how selected universities are meeting the challenge for "relevance" in communication curriculum design and application. ("Five First Courses in Communication," edited by C. David Hurt. Unpublished paper presented at the International Communication Association conference, Minneapolis, May, 1970).

Although courses are beginning to reflect a surface image of the new and relevant, what seems more important is the need for change and innovation regarding the attitudes and values of communicating encoders and decoders, senders and receivers.

Howard Martin and Bill Colburn in their new book, Communication and Consensus: An Introduction to Rhetorical Discourse (Harcourt, 1972) explain that communication has already changed as a vehicle for rhetorical endeavor and decision making. They point to factors such as "a sense of powerlessness," "frustration," "suspicion that talk is a dilatory tactic," and "loss of faith in reason," as characteristic of a declining role of communication in human public affairs.

Research into the bases for choosing communication as an alternative was done in conjunction with my doctoral research at Purdue in 1969. Besides determining that attitudes of people toward interpersonal communication as an alternative to other rhetorical forms can be identified, measured, and factor-analyzed, it was found that the completion of a basic

course in speech communication had no significant effect upon the determination of attitudes toward communication. (Schuelke, L. David, "A Factor Analysis of Speech and Communication Attitudes with Prediction by Biographical Information," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Purdue University, 1969).

What Martin and Colburn, and the research cited above indicates is that there seems to be developing an iconoclastic cynicism on the part of people who view public communication as essentially separate and meaningless when compared to other types of symbolic and physical action.

Part of this sophistry might be rooted in the addage that "It's not what you say that counts, it's what you do!" Other reasons may include the rising complexity of society and bureaucracy, technical change, "credibility gapism," games, and perhaps, return to McLuhan's tribal village.

One might conclude that traditional instruction in speech communication (as described above in the Gibson study) has helped to give the general audience an impression of communication as being primarily manipulative, non-relevant, and time-consuming when compared to direct action and demonstration. Evidence of the profession's perceived accountability may be inferred from a short reference to the role of speech teachers in The Organizer's Manual, written by a group of college students at Boston University as a guide to political action:

> (under a heading entitled, "Speakers' Bureaus")... ask a friendly professor or graduate student to run a short seminar...an experienced lecturer or a member of the speech department can help improve a speaker's style even in one or two sessions. (The Organizer's Manual, Bantam Books, 1971, p. 62).

Apparently we have convinced someone that we can be successful in teaching people how to talk (in one or two sessions!) but not that communication itself is the basis for human interaction, for resolving

conflict, for establishing and maintaining human relationships, for synthesizing meaning, and for influencing the behavior of one's self and others. To this end, we need to be held accountable. Perhaps we have been successful in identifying the Classical Canons of Rhetoric and have spent too much time on elocutio and pronuntiatio.

An alternative consensus model for teaching communication would not only involve rigor and high expectations, but its foundation would be clearly-defined objectives dealing with the full range of communication. Setting objectives, pre-testing, specification of learning activities and alternatives, and post-testing are all elements of this alternative model for improving the basic course. In using less entropy and providing more information for students, the subject matter will become more relevant, and the instructor will become more accountable.

A method to accomplish this end in the traditional course setting has already been utilized in several university settings. Stated simply, the subject of communication should be the primary subject matter for all courses in communication. Mehrley and Backes suggest that the content be based upon the "elements that bind all...communication behavior together." John Graham first examined this approach in his article, "Symposium: Speech as a Subject for Common Materials," (Speech Teacher, XVI, 4, November, 1967, p. 274f). From nearly every point of analysis, the specification of communication-related topics for student communication assignments seems advantageous when compared to the typical exhortations to students to find subjects that are of interest to them and relevant for the artificially-selected audience within the classroom.

Graham's approach at the University of Virginia and my approach at the University of Minnesota has been to include a wide range of communication-related subjects as materials for student performance in courses ranging from the "first" course in public speaking to other courses that have focused

on skill performance rather than acquisition of knowledge.

Using print sources such as DeVito's Communication Concepts and Processes (Prentice-Hall, 1971), Barker and Kibler's Speech Communication Behavior (Prentice-Hall, 1971), Sereno and Mortensen's Foundations of Communication Theory (Harper and Row, 1970), and Giffin and Patton's Basic Readings in Interpersonal Communication (Harper and Row, 1971), students have been directed to use sources and media dealing with communication as a general rule when discussing, reporting, and speaking in "fundamental" courses.

In this way, students may not only examine the traditional areas of organization, preparation, discussion, and dyadic and platform speaking; but more importantly, theoretical, applied, and philosophical ramifications of communication in all areas of life and society. Both professor and student objectives can become more rigorous, relevant, and challenging. Cognitive skills and affective responses can deal with a broad range of topics including: mass media, linguistic differences, dialects, freedom of speech, mob action, social change processes, advertising, computer logic and languages, filmic communication, and body language.

To summarize: the most relevant subject matter for courses in communication is communication. Skills can be taught in the real context of sharing information and values about the broad field of communication itself. The instructor will be accountable to himself, his colleagues and his students if he (1) specifies the objectives for the course, (2) pretests students for their communication attitudes, abilities, and knowledge, (3) provides learning activities and alternatives dealing with the entire field of communication, and (4) feeds back information regarding student progress in a systematic and open manner.

With this consensus model comes the opportunity for greater understanding of the historical, critical, experimental, and social ramifications of communication, a potential for a deeper level of knowledge of both students and instructor, and a worthwhile educational experience.

Appendix

Actual student topics for implementation of "a consensus model."

Topic

Factors of Attitude Change
Origins of Facial Expressions
Machine Translation of Languages
The Language of Dance
Dialects and Communication
Communication With Reincarnated Souls
Osgood's Communication Model
Timothy Leary's Theory of Communication
Communication and the Drug Experience
The Mathematical Theory of Communication
Theories of the Origin of Language
Signs and Symbols
How Man Communicates With A Computer
The Initial Teaching Alphabet
Aristotle and The Audience
Parental Communication and Juvenile Delinquency
Railroad Signal Communication
Stereotype and Role in Interpersonal Communication
Language: An Unreliable Means of Communication
Caution: Statistics Can Lie
Directive Language: A Basis For Survival
The Meanings in Modern Music
Semantic and Aesthetic Information
Propaganda Techniques - Visualized
Why A Phonetic Alphabet
Attitudes and Pupil Size
The Modern Church is Failing in Persuasion
Reportsmanship: How I Avoid Answering Questions
How Public Opinion Polls Work
How To Design A Questionnaire
The Public Speaking of:
How, When, and Why to Write a Letter to your Congressman